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SUBJECT: CUBAN REFUSAL TO ALLOW YOANI SANCHEZ TO TRAVEL  
RECEIVES WIDE COVERAGE; ZOE VALDES VISITS MADRID

1. Cuban "bloguera" Yoani Sanchez was chosen by leading Spanish daily El Pais and the prestigious Spanish foundation Ortega y Gasset as a 2008 journalism prize winner. Unfortunately, the GOC did not allow Sanchez to travel to Madrid to participate in the May 7 awards gala. El Pais (a left of center paper) carried an interview with Sanchez on the eve of the awards ceremony in which Sanchez expressed her (entirely justified, as events proved) pessimism that she would be allowed to travel. Sanchez, creator of the "Generacion Y" website, said her travel request was a "perfect test" of whether Raul Castro's announced opening was real or merely talk. El Pais carried a second interview with Sanchez the day after the awards ceremony in which Sanchez said the GOC had not offered any explanation for refusing her permission to travel. Asked about reprisals, she noted no one had knocked on her door and she had no proof, but she suspected she was under surveillance, her phone tapped, and that the GOC was trying to frighten her friends. Nevertheless, she rejected the label dissident. Asked whether a new political moment had come in Cuba, she said there was an attempt to make one believe it had, but she had seen no evidence. She did say there was a new and more critical attitude among citizens although the forces of political intolerance had conceded little. She expressed doubt about the ability of the system to reform itself ("that which is sick in its essence cannot transform and improve itself"). Asked about the small changes seen so far, Sanchez said all the changes to date had one objective: holding onto power. The idea was to provide a certain improvement in welfare and relax somewhat the accumulated tensions, but this would only continue to the point where it imperiled the regime's control over society.

2. The May 7 awards ceremony was an "A list" event attended by government, journalism, and literary luminaries. Attendees at a post-award ceremony cocktail were quizzed about Sanchez. First President Fernandez de la Vega was quoted as saying "the rhythm of the changes have to be decided by the Cubans. Timing in politics is very important. It is the Cuban people that have to take decisions according to their necessities and worries, which are many. What we have to do is help the Cubans so that they have their own democratic process." Madrid Mayor Alberto Ruiz Gallardon (Popular Party) said the GOC had not "calibrated the magnitude of the error it had committed upon prohibiting Yoani Sanchez from attending" the ceremony. He added, "I am sure that this gesture of power, that could have been one of tolerance, will end in precipitating more the changes toward liberty." Secretary of State for Cooperation Leire Pajin expressed confidence in seeing "important changes" in Cuba. Whereas former Colombian President Belisario Betancur described the changes as "superslow" judging by what had happened to Sanchez. Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzon criticized the lack of an opening on the part of Raul Castro's government. A May 8 El Pais editorial urged that Raul Castro "preach by example and not with rhetoric." It called the GOC's silence in the face of Sanchez' travel

request "the most pusillanimous response." "What are the Castro authorities afraid of?" asked the paper before saying the systems of the "sole party" lived paralyzed by the terror of change.

¶3. The same week as the Ortega y Gasset ceremony, the Spanish press covered the visit to Madrid of Cuban writer Zoe Valdes to promote her book, "La Ficción Fidel" ("The Fidel Fiction"). In addition to blasting the Cuban regime, Valdes told the press in no uncertain terms the Spanish Government should take a hard line with Raul Castro.

¶4. Comment: The GOC treatment of Sanchez underscored what we have been telling the Spanish Government: we will know there is meaningful change in Cuba when the GOC demonstrates respect for human rights, including the right of expression and a free press; frees political prisoners; and allows space for political dissent.  
Llorens